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Engraved by J. C. Burtis from a Daguerreotype

J. M. Sher



## ELIJAH FLETCHER,

OF NELSON COUNTY, VIRGINIA.

THE subject of this notice was born at Ludlow, Vermont, 28th July, 1789. He descended from Robert Fletcher, who emigrated from Yorkshire, England, with three sons, and settled at Concord, Middlesex county, Massachusetts, in 1630. The family bore heraldic distinction in their native land, and the armorial bearings are yet retained. The farm of one of his sons is still occupied by his descendants of the sixth generation, and the progeny, now numbering thousands, are scattered over the New-England, as well as various other states, constituting a highly respectable class of citizens. His father, Jesse Fletcher, was born at Westford, Massachusetts, in 1763. When fifteen, he volunteered and served in the Revolutionary war, and at the age of twenty, removed to Vermont, at its early settlement, purchased a tract of land in a picturesque and fertile valley, at the foot of the Green Mountains, felled the first tree, built his habitation, and passed through all the hardships of a pioneer settler of this cold and rigorous climate. He was the youngest of three brothers; the second, Josiah, soon followed, and settled near him; the elder, the Rev. Elijah Fletcher, settled in Hopkinton, New-Hampshire, whose learned, useful and eminent career was early terminated by death, leaving a small but interesting family, one of whom, Grace Fletcher, was the first wife of Daniel Webster. From the time of the first organization of his town until his death, Jesse Fletcher enjoyed the high confidence of its inhabitants, holding the highest offices of honor and trust.

It may be supposed that the subject of this memoir must, in his youthful days, have shared many hardships in common with his family. But by the strong mind and good management of his father, a fine and beautiful farm was soon opened; the primitive house gave way to a neat and handsome dwelling, and a family of fifteen children were reared with good habits and education. It was customary in those days, in respectable families, to make an effort to give one of the sons a collegiate education. Elijah, being rather of a studious, contemplative mind, was selected to enjoy this favor, and at the age of fourteen was sent to Westford Academy, where he prepared himself for college, boarding with his grandmother in the family mansion of his father. He then entered a flourishing college at Middlebury, Vermont, where he spent his freshman and sophomore years, and so distinguished himself in his studies as to receive the first honors of his class. His junior year was spent at Dartmouth College, New-Hampshire; but feeling anxious to receive his academic honors from an institution of his native state, he removed to the University of Vermont, at Burlington, where he received his degree of Bachelor of Arts, in August, 1810. He was soon invited to take charge of a literary institution in Virginia, and he removed to Amherst county, and became the president of the N. Glasgow Academy. This institution had been for some time in quite a languishing state, but by his energy and ability

he soon revived its drooping prospects, and in four years its number of students was greatly increased. During that time he married Miss Marie Antoinette Crawford, a relative of the late Hon. W. H. Crawford, of Georgia, a lady of one of the oldest and most influential families in the county. He then removed to Lynchburg, a young but thriving commercial town, on James River, and soon became the proprietor of *The Lynchburg Virginian*, the first established paper of that place. This paper had been ably edited by his predecessors, and had much popularity and influence, but in its financial affairs had been badly and unprofitably managed. The new proprietor associated with himself, in the editorial department, R. H. Toler, Esq., a young man of brilliant talents, courteous and winning manners. Mr. F. introduced into the establishment order and economy, and soon rendered it a source of handsome profit. Its circulation in less than two years was more than doubled, and it became the leading and most widely-circulated paper in the interior of the state. Although decidedly partisan, and advocating the whig cause with unflinching energy, it was still courteous, and rarely gave personal offence. The industry used in making it the vehicle of the earliest intelligence, made it useful to both parties. In the most excited contest in the presidential election between Jackson and Adams, when partisan feeling became very intense and almost savage, entering into and marring many times private friendships, Mr. Fletcher introduced in his paper a new feature, which much enhanced its interest, and neutralized in some measure its warm partisan cause. He devoted a portion of its columns to agriculture; he had not forgotten the early practical lessons learned on his native farm, and he viewed with regret the depressed state of the agricultural interests in his adopted state. At this time there were but two agricultural papers published in the United States. The substantial farmers of both parties felt a lively interest in this information, and eagerly sought the paper, although in a political point of view not altogether agreeable to them.

Agriculture in Virginia was at a very low ebb.\* By an injudicious mode of cultivating the lands, they had become exhausted, and the planters were convinced there must be a change. The alternative stared them in the face, of improving their lands or selling them for a trifle, and removing to a new country, for to longer stay upon them was to starve. The original fertility of the soil was great, from the first settlement of the country. Tobacco had been the staple and favorite crop, from its bulk more easily carried to market over the bad roads, and always sure to command a remunerating price in money. This crop was the first grown on clearing the lands, and was repeated as long as it could be produced; then alternately, year after year, was corn planted and wheat or oats sown. The land, cultivated with a small one-horse plow, which penetrated the soil not more than two or three inches, without any rest or change of ameliorating crop, without the use of manure or the cultivation of artificial grasses, became quite exhausted, and given up as no longer useful for cultivation, and more new lands were cleared to undergo the same process of destruction. Before this time it is probable not twenty bushels of grass seed had ever been sown in Amherst county. Mr. Fletcher took advan-



tage of this state of things, and besides warmly advocating the cause of agriculture, through the columns of his widely-circulating paper, soon began to teach practically how easy it was to resuscitate these worn-out lands, and restore them to their natural fertility. He introduced deep plowing, drained the wet land, leveled the gullies and ravines which the washing rains had been so long forming and deepening in a soil which was destitute of sod or vegetable matter to keep it together, and to sow clover and plaster. This process acted like a charm upon these lands, and they immediately began to repay the labor and outlay by giving bountiful and remunerating crops. Mr. F. did not stop at this, but as soon as he got his farm in a situation to support stock, he began to import the best improved breeds of cattle, sheep and hogs, paying no attention to the fine blooded race-horse, which had been the only animal of cost and care in the country. His early efforts in agricultural pursuits were looked upon by many as the visionary theory of a book farmer, but the practical results were so striking that all who saw were convinced, and one after another of his neighbors began to follow his example, and a general spirit of improvement was infused which has produced favorable changes in this part of the country. Few sections of the United States have more natural advantages than the Piedmont counties of Virginia—a deep, rich soil; the most picturesque, grand and beautiful mountain scenery; the best water; the purest air, and a most salubrious climate. These advantages were not unobserved by Mr. Fletcher, and induced him to invest largely, which he could do at little cost in a country which, although much exhausted and depressed by bad management, he was persuaded could not be abandoned, but would be sought for, improved and become valuable. Mr. Fletcher continued to own and manage his paper some twenty years, until the year 1840, when, becoming disgusted with heartless politics, and anxious to devote more time to his favorite pursuits of rural life, he disposed of the Virginian newspaper. Since then he has spent much time on his plantations in Amherst county, although he still retains his old dwelling in the city of Lynchburg, where his family spend a portion of their time. His favorite plantation is Sweet-Briar, twelve miles distant from the city. This plantation contains some three thousand acres, situated at the foot of a spur of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Its broad fields are in a good state of cultivation, well covered with fine flocks and herds, and extensive and convenient barns. Numerous neat and comfortable servants' houses, with their gardens attached, cover several acres, ranging in different directions in streets, so as not to be too much crowded. And there has recently been erected one of the most picturesque and imposing villas in the state, the graceful style of which harmonizes with the surrounding mountain scenery. These altogether present an aspect of a neat and thriving village. All these buildings, excepting the family residence, have been erected by his own servants, having among them almost every description of mechanic. He has abandoned the custom of employing white men to oversee and manage his hands. Under his kind treatment, and with his instructions, his servants have learned all the operations of good farming. He has convinced them it is better to do their duty volun-

tarily than by compulsion; tried to instill into them principles of morality; made them fond of their homes; encouraged matrimony and attention to their families. With general instructions laid down by their master, the older lead and direct the younger, and every thing is carried on in a peaceful and quiet way, most of them laboring cheerfully and with much emulation to do as well as their neighboring farmers. There is rarely a punishment inflicted, except for the little delinquences of children, and then it is made the duty of parents to correct. None are ever sold except the incorrigible, whom no advice can deter from being a trouble to their master and a disgrace to their fellow servants. They are permitted, when there is no convenient preaching on the Sabbath, to hold religious service among themselves. There are among them some who take a lead in these meetings, who perform the marriage ceremony, and the funeral service over their deceased fellow servants, with much propriety and solemnity. If one of the numerous sympathizing readers of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* could visit this plantation during the week, and see them all carrying on their varied labors with cheerful alacrity, well clad and well fed, or could view them on the Sabbath, neatly attired in their Sunday garments, they would soon see that their sympathy could find thousands of objects nearer home more demanding its exercise. He has endeavored to elevate them in their own estimation, to make them self-reliant, and think themselves accountable beings. And although he has seen great improvement, he finds few among them, unaided by directions and care, that would, if free to do for themselves, make a comfortable living for their families. He has experimented with some who had been so faithful and useful to him, in particular branches of business, that he has given them their outfit and set them up for themselves, but it has in every instance proved a failure, soon becoming worthless and unhappy. They are a race that seem always to be in a state of minority and in want of a guardian. The servants look upon Mr. F. as their friend and not as their tyrant. The smallest child lisps the name of their master with the endearing attachment they do that of their mother, and approach him in confidence to make their little wants and grievances known. He dwells among them in great confidence and security, never locking a door night or day to prevent their approach. He confides in their honesty, and trusts each one in his department with every thing under his care. The hostler keeps the keys to the corn house; the heads in the dairy or in the house have free access over all intrusted to them.

Although there are from one to two hundred slaves on this plantation alone, every thing is as peaceful and quiet as the most retired hamlet. Mr. Fletcher is diffident and retiring, shunning all notoriety and declining all public offices. In a private way his benevolence is equal to any one. The widow and the poor never fail to find assistance and relief in him. He is ever active to aid in the building of churches and schools, giving land and money freely for these purposes, and being foremost in helping to construct roads, or aid in any other improvement in his neighborhood. But perhaps his usefulness in setting an example in agricultural improvements is the most valuable. If the glory of making two blades of grass grow where one grew

before, is greater than that of conquering armies, that glory belongs to Mr. F. He has not only made two blades of grass grow where one grew before, but he has taught others to do it. Mr. Fletcher is probably the greatest slave and land holder in this part of Virginia. He has a numerous tenantry, who are so pleased with their landlord that they rarely leave their farms. Their rents are such as to enable them to support their families and pay with ease, and if any accident of a loss of crop or sickness prevent them paying, indulgence is always extended, and rarely ever has there been a distress for rent, unless there was an evident intention to defraud. Mr. Fletcher has four children, two sons and two daughters, all of whom have received accomplished educations. His daughters and eldest son, Dr. Sidney Fletcher, after completing a course of studies in Paris, made an extensive tour through Continental Europe and the Orient. Those best acquainted with Mr. Fletcher are surprised how he manages his extensive landed interests, his numerous slaves, his large moneyed concerns, so quietly and with so much ease. In his temperament, he is calm and deliberate, and rarely excited. His varied interests, like the rivulet, gently flow into a large stream, moving noiselessly. Some who have observed Mr. Fletcher's success in life, attribute it to good luck, but one who knows well his career would say to young men of self-denying, prudent habits, that with good and honest intentions, with good judgment and never-failing perseverance, they can go and do likewise. Mr. F. has visited his native home but four times since he left for Virginia. The last visit was made in the summer of 1852. What a change had been made in forty-two years! The quiet valley of the Black River, with its thin habitations, had become almost a continued village, with its numerous churches, academies and beautiful residences, with large and extensive factories, driven by the waters flowing from the immediate mountains. And through the former pasture lands on the banks of the river, and in fine view of the old mansion, pass six times a day the heavy-laden cars on the rail-road lately built between Boston and Burlington. This was a re-union of the surviving members of the family, the father and mother of whom had for many years slept the sleep of death. But the old farm, the old mansion, shaded by the graceful elm, the beautiful fields, the verdant meadows, the mountain stream reflecting the dark foliage of the fir tree, and which they had frequented in their boyhood to catch trout, were there as in bygone days; and the kind domestic who nursed their parents in their declining years, was there to welcome them. The farm is still retained in the family, and although all the members are far removed, it is cherished with care, and kept in good state of improvement, and ever open to the hospitable reception of any one of them who wishes to make a pilgrimage there. This meeting of a family which had been separated for more than forty years, was thus noticed by one of the leading journals of the state:

"We are much obliged to one of the party concerned, for the following interesting article. The cases are doubtless rare where an entire Vermont family has been scattered over the Union, and yet has retained the old homestead as a common centre of attraction. The cases are not rare, however, where the sons and daughters of Ver-



monsters are scattered far and wide, but ever retaining the liveliest affection for their old mountain home, the village church and school, and the 'graves of their fathers.' Many from the south and west have been in the habit of wending their way to old Vermont in June, July and August, to return in September and October; and now that the facilities for traveling have been so greatly improved, the number is greatly increased. For a fortnight or more the tide of emigration has been from the south and west to the north and east. We heartily unite in the suggestion that *all* the absent sons and daughters of Vermont should imitate the example here recorded. Aside from the happy family meetings which may thus be arranged, we venture to add, as the result of our own somewhat limited observation, that no section of the north is so attractive, or so salubrious, as Vermont in the summer months:

"THE GRAVES OF OUR FATHERS.—The family, and some of the descendants of Jesse Fletcher, Esq., one of the first settlers of Ludlow, Vt., after a separation of nearly forty years, recently met together at the paternal mansion, near Proctorsville: seven from Eastern and Western New-York, four from Virginia and three from Indiana. Their parents have been dead many years. No one of the children, out of a family of fifteen, lives in the state; yet the farm their father settled on, in 1782, is still owned by them.

"This meeting, after so long a separation, was happy and interesting, calculated not only to strengthen the bonds of fraternal kindness, but to honor their deceased parents. They marched together to the old meeting-house and grave-yard.

"In the way their fathers trod."

They separated, resolved to meet semi-annually hereafter, at the old mansion.

"They all came together in *less than three days' travel* by the steam-cars and boat; whereas, twenty-eight years ago, the one the furthest off was *forty-six days* making the same journey.

"We hope the absent sons and daughters of Vermont, scattered over the world, will imitate the foregoing example, and return often to the salubrious air and mountain scenery of their native land, in honor of the memory of their pioneer fathers, who gave them constitutions and habits to compete for the honors of our wide-spread Union."









